

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE TRANSPARENCY COMMISSION AND THE ASSESSMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE IN PANAMA

About the Transparency Commission (CT)

1. What is the Transparency Commission (CT)?

The Transparency Commission (TC) is an international, transdisciplinary research group made up of experts on abuses in ecclesial settings. It is funded by the University of Notre Dame Law School (United States), and by Villanueva University (Spain).

The TC was created for the purpose of conducting an Assessment of Institutional Response (AIR)—in a transdisciplinary, professional, independent, and thorough manner—of cases of abuse of minors and persons in situations of vulnerability within the Church.

This group of experts focuses its work on places where crises related to ecclesial abuse have not yet occurred or have not yet come to public light. By examining the past, the TC makes recommendations for the future. The AIR is the primary tool through which the TC makes a contribution to the restoration and healing of those who have suffered abuse in the Church. It seeks to assist in the transformation of institutions into safer and more protective environments, especially for minors and persons in situations of vulnerability.

Its purpose is to contribute, through a report that includes a set of recommendations, to being an instrument that can help in the restoration and healing of those who have suffered abuse in the Church, and to be a factor that fosters the institution's transformation, with safer and more protective environments for minors and persons in situations of vulnerability, while assessing compliance with the standards necessary for the proper handling of abuse complaints.

2. What are the guiding principles of their work?

In line with the final document of the 2024 Synod on Synodality, the CT's work embraces the guiding principles of transparency, accountability, and evaluation, and is grounded in the framework of transitional and restorative justice.

Transitional justice is a model that emerged in response to situations involving serious human rights violations; within the Church, the crisis of child sexual abuse also calls for this type of justice. It has four central elements: truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition. Both the Church's magisterium and the work of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors have highlighted the complementarity between the categories of transitional justice and the principles of the Church's Social Doctrine regarding justice, reparation, and prevention.

As the term itself suggests, the goal is to create and mark a transition—a “before” and an “after”—between the period in which abuse was perpetrated, mishandled, or covered up—allowing more victims to suffer and leaving them without justice or reparation—and a new period in which safeguarding, reporting, investigations, and care for victims result in a minimum of abuse and, should it occur, a swift and effective response.

It is also a shift in focus: from prioritizing the protection of the institution’s reputation to prioritizing the victim. This shift also involves making space for remembrance and reconciliation, acknowledging past mistakes, in order to prevent future abuses and foster the necessary restoration and healing.

The principle of transparency is characterized by process management grounded in fundamental ethical values such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, and effectiveness. Accountability refers to the set of mechanisms that enable an institution to provide a well-founded explanation of its objectives and results to its stakeholders and contribute to its improvement. Finally, evaluation allows for the formulation of well-founded and systematic judgments regarding the value, merit, or quality of the process.

3. Who are the members of the Transparency Commission?

The Transparency Commission is made up of individuals from eight countries, with recognized expertise in their respective fields. Half of the team is Latin American and works in Latin America.

The TC's group of experts is made up of individuals external to the diocese and therefore independent and free of conflicts of interest. At the same time, they have a knowledge of the Church and the region that facilitates their analysis of the dynamics of ecclesiastical abuse in Panama.

The team is interdisciplinary and is divided into several subgroups according to the members' areas of specialization and the work they carry out: legal-canonical, clinical, accountability, theological-pastoral, socio-cultural, and communications.

4. What criteria were used to select them?

The criteria has been a combination of practical experience and theoretical training. Most members of the Commission come from the university academic field and combine research work with consulting for Church institutions on the subject of abuse and its prevention, or with accompanying victims, survivors, and perpetrators.

Beyond recognized expertise, the members of the Commission are chosen based on linguistic and cultural reasons. For example, for the pilot project, some experts were members of CEPROME Latin America, the Interdisciplinary Research and Training Center for the Protection of Minors in Latin America. Others have worked in Church tribunals in

Latin America and at the Vatican. Still others hold recognized standing in the development of protocols and standards, the accompaniment of victims, crisis communication, or the socio-cultural aspects of the phenomenon of abuse.

In addition to recognized professional experience in their area of specialization and practice, experts are required to demonstrate independence, knowledge of the Church, and the absence of conflicts of interest.

5. *Can a commission made up exclusively of Church members be called independent? Where does its legitimacy and validity lie?*

To carry out an Assessment of Institutional Response of abuse cases in an ecclesial context, the choice has been made to form an external Commission composed of experts who, because of their membership in the Church, are familiar with its particular dynamics. This allows them to properly understand and evaluate the nuances of the ecclesial context, especially in light of the practices of the local Church. This also serves to reinforce their authority within the ecclesial context and maintain their autonomy, without conflicts of interest that might compromise their work.

Each local church must take responsibility for leading the processes of listening, healing, and justice; however, it is also true that turning to outside consultants provides a different perspective that can contribute positively through their independence, experience, and advice. This type of external evaluation has proven in many cases to be a necessary and beneficial contribution to resolving critical situations.

The Commission's legitimacy and validity are based on the independence of each of the experts and the guarantee of excellence provided by their own institutions, most of which are universities with high standards of ethical and academic quality. Likewise, the Commission is financially autonomous from the archdiocese, since funding for the investigation comes from Villanueva University and the University of Notre Dame.

Finally, the Assessment of Institutional Response reports undergo a review by experts outside the Transparency Commission, who evaluate the quality of the methodology and the way in which each report reaches its conclusions.

6. *Why now, in 2026, after so many years without a response?*

The work of the Transparency Commission coincides in time with the 25th anniversary of the publications in The Boston Globe that brought to public attention cases of sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by members of the hierarchy in that North American diocese.

Over the course of this quarter century, the Church has reflected on the absence of effective action for the prevention of abuse and the protection of victims, as well as on

its responsibility in covering up perpetrators. As a result of this growing awareness, concrete actions have been implemented. Some of the most significant milestones are noted below:

On 30 April 2001, Pope John Paul II issued the Apostolic Letter “*Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela*”, clarifying that more grave crimes, including the sexual abuse of a minor by a cleric, were reserved to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This provided clarity regarding the responsibility for prosecuting these cases and specific procedural norms by which to do so;

On 19 March 2010, Pope Benedict XVI published a Pastoral Letter addressed to the Catholics of Ireland, in which he expressed his dismay “at the abuse of children and vulnerable young people by members of the Church in Ireland, particularly priests and religious, [that] has come to light”;

Benedict XVI made a decisive contribution to a significant shift in the Church's attitude toward the handling of sexual abuse. He promoted the reform of certain aspects of the canonical penal and procedural norms concerning the *delicta graviora*, on the basis of which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith promulgated, on 20 July 2010, “Modifications to the Norms on the Most Serious Crimes”;

On 3 May 2011, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a circular letter to the Episcopal Conferences on the preparation of Guidelines for dealing with cases of sexual abuse of minors by clergy;

On 22 March 2014, Pope Francis established the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, chaired by Cardinal Seán Patrick O'Malley, OFM Cap., Archbishop of Boston;

On 4 June 2016, the Argentine pontiff issued an Apostolic Letter *motu proprio*, “As a Loving Mother,” in which he further clarified the canons of the Code of Canon Law governing the “grave reasons” that may lead to the removal of diocesan bishops, eparchs, and those assimilated to them in law, specifically with regard to cases of abuse of minors;

From 21 to 24 February 2019, Pope Francis convened an international summit at the Vatican, entitled “The Protection of Minors in the Church,” attended by the presidents of episcopal conferences, the heads of the Eastern Churches, representatives of the Union of Superiors General and the International Union of Superiors General, members of the Curia, and the Council of Cardinals;

That same year, on 7 May 2019, the Apostolic Letter *motu proprio* “*Vos estis lux mundi*” was published (later updated in 2023), establishing mandatory procedures, expanding responsibilities (including for bishops), and strengthening protection for victims, marking a turning point for transparency and accountability;

In 2021, the Apostolic Constitution “Pascite Gregem Dei” was promulgated, reforming Book VI of the Code of Canon Law and establishing clearer and more severe penalties for clergy who commit abuse against minors or vulnerable persons.

Following these actions and also taking into account reports published by local churches, national parliaments, or other independent bodies, the present Transparency Commission seeks to be, proactively, one more instrument to help the Church implement or reinforce a determined stance in the fight against abuse and its prevention, grounded in transparency, accountability, and evaluation.

On the Assessment of Institutional Response (AIR) in Panama

7. *What does the Assessment of Institutional Response project in Panama consist of?*

The pilot Assessment of Institutional Response took place in the Archdiocese of Panama, where the context and management of abuse of minors and persons in situations of vulnerability was examined, covering the period from 2001 to 2025.

The general methodology was grounded in transitional and restorative justice, which places victims at the center. In turn, the transdisciplinary nature of the study was carried out using the methodologies of the various areas of specialization: clinical, forensic, theological-pastoral, sociological, compliance with protocols and standards, and analysis of public communication.

To date, most reports on abuse in the Church have focused on singular dimensions, without providing a comprehensive and coherent explanation of what has failed in prevention processes and the internal management of cases.

Without explanation there is no understanding, and without understanding there is no effective change. Bringing together a commission of experts from multiple disciplines allows for a fuller understanding of the problem in all its dimensions. Making use of all available information gathered from multiple disciplinary perspectives allows TC to generate proposals aimed at specific improvements, from a broader understanding of the past problems.

The work of the Commission's members includes: collection of data from the diocesan archive, a field listening process (based on individual interviews and written testimonies), the study of other thematic or territorial reports (in civil or ecclesiastical settings) published by other entities, and the mapping of how abuse in Panama has been represented in local media coverage.

The project had several phases: planning and preparation, documentary analysis, interviews and surveys, evaluation and comparison, drafting of a report and recommendations, and a public presentation of the Assessment of Institutional Response.

8. *Why Is This Assessment of Institutional Response Relevant?*

The Assessment of Institutional Response in the Archdiocese of Panama marks another milestone in the process that the Catholic Church has undergone over the past 25 years as it has come to understand the need to radically and proactively put an end to abuse of minors and vulnerable persons.

As the report states, “the fact that ecclesial institutions voluntarily subject their own actions to an assessment of this nature responds to a demand for transparency, evaluation, and accountability, but also to a trend that is increasingly present in contemporary ecclesial regulations.”

This initiative does not arise in response to an external complaint, but rather as a voluntary exercise of institutional responsibility. As the report itself states, combating abuse requires knowing the truth. The report seeks to take an important step toward uncovering that truth and, based on the investigation conducted, proposes specific actions for improvement.

9. *How does it differ from national reports or internal audits?*

There are several differences compared to other national reports or internal audits. First, there was no external pressure or allegations that influenced the Archdiocese’s decision to undergo an institutional evaluation. This decision was driven by the Archdiocese’s own authorities, particularly Monsignor Ulloa.

Second, the evaluation is conducted by an interdisciplinary team that seeks to address the issue from various angles: support for victims, institutional procedures, compliance with canon law, communication, the theological dimension, and action within a social and cultural framework. We believe that these multiple perspectives lead to a better understanding of the problem and, therefore, enable the development of better recommendations.

Third, the Commission is composed of members of the Church who understand the dynamics of abuse within the Church—and within the Latin American context in particular—and who are part of a much broader group of people committed to eradicating this evil so that parishes may be safe places where people can live out their faith.

10. *What does it mean that the AIR in Panama is a pilot project?*

The fact that the AIR in Panama is a pilot project means that this is the first time a comprehensive methodology has been applied that can be replicated in other dioceses or church organizations. This initial project has made it possible to test a methodology

and a system of work based on professional listening, archival research, conducting interviews with various stakeholders, and analyzing the media and the country's sociocultural context.

Its validity is guaranteed by the experts' knowledge and the systemic analysis they have conducted, in addition to the validation provided by the review of three independent experts, who reviewed the first draft and deemed it a job well done.

The final AIR report on Panama offers a series of recommendations to the archdiocese which, beyond the analysis itself, are intended to have a transformative effect and serve as a practical and effective proposal aimed at fostering a culture of protection—one in which victims are at the center—through the promotion of prevention and a proactive approach, ensuring that each person receives follow-up support at every stage of the process.

11. Who is paying? Why did they pay? How much did this report cost?

To ensure independence, the Archdiocese did not provide funding. It was responsible only for lodging and ground transportation within Panama so that the researchers could carry out their work. This did not give the Archdiocese the right to participate in the investigation: it had no involvement in the analysis, writing or editing of the report.

The costs associated with the report were funded by the University of Notre Dame Law School (United States) and the Villanueva University Foundation (Spain). The proposal to create a Transparency Commission was presented to both institutions, which decided to support it because they believed it aligned with their missions. Both are Catholic universities committed to the pursuit of truth and eager to assist the Catholic Church through the findings of the Commission's investigation.

The costs included airfare, software, materials, report design and, above all, payments to the researchers. The experts received compensation for their professional work, although it is important to note that this is not their primary source of income. Each has a separate position outside the Commission.

12. Will the assessments deliver justice to victims?

It is important to be clear about the scope of the assessments. The Transparency Commission cannot directly deliver justice to victims, but it can help in the healing process through the pursuit and acknowledgment of truth. The Transparency Commission's work sets the stage for Church, and possibly State, authorities to enact reparative justice for victims of abuse.

The goal of this assessment of institutional response is to bring the truth to light with transparency, through a holistic approach to the problem of abuse, and to make comprehensive recommendations for improvement.

13. Doesn't this process amount to revictimizing victims?

There may be a prevailing feeling that a reparation process reopens wounds and revictimizes those who have already been harmed in the past. This can happen when a person who has suffered abuse is forced to repeat their story, when their word is doubted, when their privacy is not respected, exposed publicly, or when they are subjected to endless bureaucratic procedures.

That said, it is not true that every reparation process is inherently revictimizing. The real difference lies in how the process unfolds, the methodology used, and the attention given to victims, placing them at the center of the investigation and creating a safe space with the support of clinical specialists experienced in accompanying those who have suffered sexual abuse.

Claiming that there should be no reparation processes in order to avoid revictimization can lead to another form of harm: abandonment, institutional silence, and the avoidance of responsibility. The question is not whether to make reparation, but how to ensure that the process does not further harm the person who has suffered, and that the institution and its available resources are placed at the service of victims, with a guarantee of good practices to achieve this.

Regarding the findings of the Panama report

14. According to the report's data, the last five-year period has seen the highest number of abuse cases. Why is that?

One of the main problems regarding abuse is that a large number of cases go unreported. The last five-year period has seen the highest number of reports, which is not the same as saying there were more cases—we don't know that. There are circumstances that lead us to believe the increase in reports is due to institutional changes: not only have there been changes in canon law, but the Archdiocese has also implemented new channels for receiving reports and supporting victims, such as the Office of Listening, which was established in 2024.

The increase in reports may be linked to these institutional changes: for example, in the two years since the Office of Listening was established, it has received three reports, which is more than were received in some previous five-year periods. Furthermore, if institutional improvements are implemented for prevention and to align with the

principles of Transitional Justice and Restorative Justice, we should expect the number of complaints to increase in the future while the number of cases decreases. These phenomena are not contradictory in the short and medium term. In the long term, however, we could expect a stronger correlation between cases and complaints.

15. *The report says there are incomplete files. Does this mean that information was destroyed or concealed?*

We found no evidence to lead us to suspect that. Often, records are incomplete due to a lack of documentation or an inability to maintain continuity in procedures. The reality is that we do not know why they are incomplete, and it is worth noting that the Archdiocese provided support at all times to gather the information we requested. Looking ahead, we have made recommendations regarding the management of information and records to foster greater institutional accountability.

16. *What assurances can you give us that the Archdiocese has not withheld or concealed relevant information?*

The findings of the report itself lead to the conclusion that the Archdiocese has been cooperative and transparent at all times in responding to the commission's requests. If it had withheld or concealed information in order to manipulate the figures, the results of its handling of the matter would surely have been more favorable. Rather than concealing information, the leading hypothesis is that in many cases the information was not properly processed to ensure that records were kept in the files.

The possible lack of formality in handling information is likely linked to a lack of adequate resources and an absence of professional procedures, rather than to a policy of cover-up. This way of proceeding is not unique to the diocese. In recent decades, there has been a growing awareness within the universal Church, both of the gravity of abuse cases within the institution and of the need for more effective prevention and management measures.

17. *The report offers recommendations that protect the accused. Isn't this a form of the clericalism they criticize?*

It is not clericalism, but prudence. There are two fundamental pillars of the processes for handling complaints: putting victims at the center and protecting their rights; and guaranteeing due process for those accused.

These processes must be conducted with great care, because there are always two risks: revictimizing a victim or wrongfully accusing an innocent person. Both are very serious

problems, and every complaint is a highly sensitive situation because the facts can only be clarified through investigation.

These processes must ensure well-founded, impartial responses that respect the rights of all parties. Of course, this does not justify inaction, undue delays, failure to provide information to those affected, or failure to implement protective measures when there is an immediate risk.

18. What do you think should happen to a priest who is found guilty of abuse?

In recent years, the Church has taken steps to place victims at the center of all its policies for addressing cases of abuse. However, the centrality of the victims should not preclude attention to those guilty of abuse, since they, too—in addition to serving their sentences—have a path of reparation and restoration to follow.

19. Why don't they evaluate specific cases or identify those responsible for the abuses by name? Isn't analyzing procedures and structures a way to cover up individual responsibility?

Efforts have been made to proceed with due discretion out of respect for legal procedures and individuals' privacy. This report is not intended to be accusatory, nor is it a judicial report. Its purpose is to evaluate management; the investigation of responsibilities and the determination of sanctions are the responsibility of the institutions that administer justice.

20. Why are only 24 of the 37 complaints being evaluated? What happened to the 13 that were excluded?

The Archdiocese of Panama does not govern the entire territory of Panama, but rather Panama City and its surrounding areas. Therefore, the first exclusion criterion was to exclude complaints filed with the Archdiocese but pertaining to other territories—and thus not within the Archdiocese's jurisdiction to process. Second, the selected analysis period was from 2001 to 2025, so complaints regarding incidents occurring before or after that period were excluded. Third, the report focuses on abuse of minors and vulnerable individuals. If the complaints concerned other types of incidents—such as sexual misconduct between adults—they were also excluded from the report.

21. If there were only 24 reports, does that mean there have been few cases of abuse in Panama?

What it means is that there were 24 reports during that period, but that doesn't mean there were 24 cases. Unfortunately, not all cases of abuse are reported. The sociocultural analysis also shows that in Panamanian society, victims may feel unprotected or unsupported. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that a complaint will be filed. That is why it is also important to work to ensure that victims feel safe and supported so that they do not suffer further victimization.

22. Does the Vatican endorse this Commission? Was the Dicastery aware of it?

The Vatican has been kept informed at all times of the progress of the work; both the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and the Pontifical Commission for Latin America are aware of the CT's work. Furthermore, some members of the commission work or have worked at both the PCPM and the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

23. Are Panama's parishes safe places for children and vulnerable people?

Safer than they were in 2001, but not as safe as they need to be in the future. What we have today are committed individuals; what's missing are systems that don't depend on the goodwill of each individual. That is exactly what the report calls for us to build.